



# THE UNSEEN MASTERPIECES OF OUR INSTINCTS: EXPLORING THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS ONE'S INSTINCT OF SELF-PRESERVATION HAS BROUGHT UPON SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the profound role of the self-preservation instinct in shaping human progress across physical, psychological, and societal dimensions. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, the study highlights how this primal instinct has driven collective interdependence, the development of advanced medical technologies, and the evolution of societal norms and laws. It examines instances of cooperation, such as group hunting in prehistoric times, alongside modern achievements like targeted cancer therapies and the reform of legal systems in response to injustices. By analyzing the interplay between the instinct for survival and human ingenuity, this paper emphasizes the interconnectedness of biology, culture, and innovation. Additionally, it addresses counterarguments and limitations, such as the complexity of defining instincts and the external factors influencing human behavior. This research encourages deeper exploration into the subconscious processes governing instincts and their far-reaching implications for human evolution, societal cohesion, and individual well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** Self-Preservation Instinct, Psychological Advancements, Societal Evolution, Human Behavior, Medical Advancements, Survival Mechanisms

## INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1900s, famous psychologists like Freud and McDougall have made theories about the instinctive behavior of humans. Some major instincts humans have consisted of the self-preservation instinct, the sexual survival instinct, and the social instinct, which psychologists suggest are all innately present in us. This paper focuses on the primal instinct of self-preservation and attempts to connect this instinct to some physical and psychological advancements humans have developed. Due to one's instinct to self-preserve, interdependence between different clans was achieved, new medicinal technologies to defeat strong pathogens were developed, and society's mindset—its social norms and body of laws—can be constantly transformed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Humans have developed constantly throughout time. From *Australopithecus afarensis*—an ancient form of apes commonly known to be our direct ancestors—to archaic humans, and finally, to *homo sapiens*—us. During human evolution, appearances, behavior, tools, and even mindsets have shifted drastically. However, one thing remains unchanged: our desire to survive. In psychological terms, this is called the instinct of self-preservation. Over centuries, famous psychologists like Sigmund Freud, William McDougall, and William James have debated and proposed numerous theories about these 'instincts.'

### 1. Instincts

McDougall was one of the first psychologists to suggest and define the "instincts" present in us, which can be found in his famous Instinct Theory of Motivation. This theory attempts to explain the "forces" that motivate humans

to behave or act in a certain way—instincts. Moreover, McDougall believes that humans are born with those instincts; these act as a natural motivating force for all our actions (By et al., 2023). But what can be considered an instinct? In his theory, McDougall suggests that an instinct must be uniform, unlearned, and universal across all species. Simply put, it is the subconscious mind working towards a goal without any prior education or experience. In terms of the instinct of self-preservation, to achieve the goal of survival, this instinct often triggers and reinforces certain emotions, like fear, hunger, and repulsion; these emotions act as the primary director of our behavior (By et al., 2023).

### 2. The instinct of self-preservation

The definition of self-preservation is the will to protect oneself from external harm or death. However, the instinct of self-preservation—Eros—the life drive—is commonly mistaken to be present only in life-threatening situations, such as the fleeing motion you have when a car is racing towards you. However, it can be seen in insignificant, common actions.

The instinct of self-preservation can be divided into 3 subcategories: physical well-being, self-regulation and skills, and resources. Firstly, the category 'physical wellbeing' focuses on the body, encompassing one's health, fitness, and endurance. 'Self-regulation and skills' highlight skills necessary for survival, like maintenance and repair, as well as the ability to adapt to new circumstances. Last but not least, 'Resources' act upon one's need for basic resources to survive—shelter, food, and water. However,

to get access to these things, money is needed, which incorporates savings and funds (Naylor, 2024).

### 3. Advancements

In this paper, the word “advancement” can be defined as development, evolution, and growth. As a result of mankind’s self-preserving mindset, physical advancements were developed, like group hunting skills and medical tools to defeat strong pathogens. Psychological advancements were also created, such as the constant changes in society’s view on the class system and the death penalty.

### METHODOLOGY

This study employs a secondary qualitative methodology to explore the role of the self-preservation instinct in driving societal, medical, and psychological advancements. A detailed review of existing literature, historical case studies, and expert analyses forms the basis of the research, enabling an in-depth understanding of how these instinct influences human behavior and societal evolution. The secondary qualitative approach is suitable for synthesizing diverse perspectives from credible sources, offering a broad and nuanced analysis without the need for primary data collection. However, the reliance on pre-existing literature limits the study’s scope, potentially excluding emerging insights or alternate interpretations.

### Interdependence

Owing to one’s instinct of self-preservation, mankind has learned to cooperate and interdepend on each other, ensuring survival in the prehistoric periods and later bestowing momentous scientific enhancements upon society.

To this day, people link the animal kingdom to “rugged individualism” and aggression—the idea of killing or being killed. Interestingly, science suggests quite the opposite—the cooperation and comradeship of organisms. At the University of Chicago, zoologist W. C. Allee and his team conducted multiple experiments with planetarian worms, which were exposed to ultraviolet radiation, lethal to them. The first control group had one worm placed on a dish, while another control group had a cluster of 20 worms placed on one dish. Both groups were exposed to the same amount of UV radiation in the same setting. Eventually, all the worms died, but the second group—the community of worms—lasted much longer.

Control group	Survival time (mins)
Group 1 (the single worm):	41
Group 2 (the group of worms):	517

A scientific explanation for this would be that the worms could “shade [each other] from lethal radiation.” However, with another experiment, Allee discovered that this was not the only reason for their prolonged survival time. In this experiment, Allee irradiated all the worms together and only separated them *after* the harm was done. Some worms were placed singly, while 10 others were grouped. Similarly, the worms grouped survived longer.

Control group	Survival time (mins)
Group 1 (the single worms):	78
Group 2 (the group of worms):	148

This time, however, the scientific reasoning behind this finding could not be deduced. The author comments that the worms “somehow lent strength to one another” (Montagu, 1950). Perhaps nature pushes for cooperation over individualism. Along that line of reasoning, today’s world has largely escalated from the reliance on brutality to a more sophisticated and knowledge-based society. This transformation was only made possible with interdependence and cooperation between civilizations.

In the ancient period, the life expectancy at birth—the years one is estimated to live from birth—was only about 20–30 years. This was primarily due to poor sanitary conditions and limited access to basic resources, such as food, shelter, and clean water. Due to their self-preserving instinct—in this case—their need for food, the men would go hunting each day. They increased their chances of acquiring food and protected each other from danger by forming social groups and being “social and vocal.” When hunting, they would keep watch for one another and use warning calls when predators, like snakes and leopards, were close by. This group defense method would give them an advantage over their sizeable and stronger predators. Moreover, due to this instinct—in this case—their desire to find shelter, they would settle down in camps, consisting of many social groups (Montagu, 1950). Together, they would build shelters and hearths, which scared away many predators and avoided surprise attacks. In summary, as a result of our ancestors’ primal instinct of self-preservation, social bonds between people were strengthened; it was proved that interdependence was crucial to sustain mankind. In addition, culturally and physically distinct social groups were established, which later transcended into large civilizations that make up today’s alliances and confederations. Throughout centuries, scientists, biologists, astronomers, and many more have built on each other’s ideas and findings, contributing to the wide network of information. Developments from Galileo’s telescope, the first man on the moon to space probes roaming around galaxies; nevertheless, many subjects still require further investigation and research, like the trajectory of medicine, where doctors and scientists worldwide are constantly at work to develop cures for pre-existing and evolving pathogens and diseases.

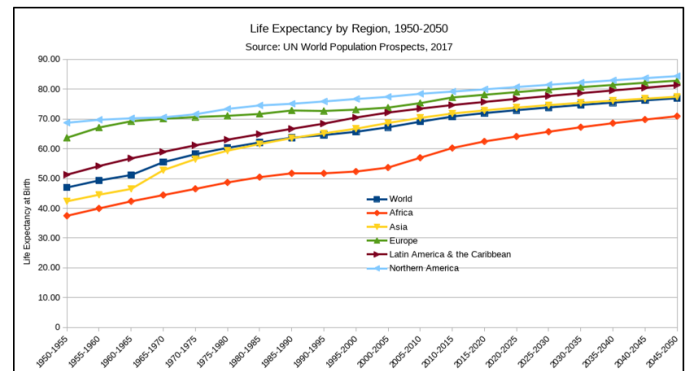
### Medicinal Advancements

Due to their self-preserving instinct, mankind is continuously searching for new medical advancements to combat intruding viruses, like the coronavirus, as well as issues that stem from internal problems with the genetic code, like cancer.

Mankind has never been free from diseases. Palaeopathologists are experts who study ancient diseases and injuries by examining fossil fuels and skeletal remains. They discovered traces of bacteria in rocks from over 600 million years ago and found parasites in petrified shells dating back about 350 million years ago (Ilnicka, 1995, p. 295). Throughout centuries,

people developed different ways to combat these perpetuating bacteria and viruses, advancing preceding methods to increase the likelihood of survival. Hippocrates, in the Medieval Ages, believed in the body's ability to revive itself and altered external circumstances like the climate of the house, cleanliness of water, and quality of food (Gunderman, 2020). His ideas were believed and utilized for over two millennia until the Germ Theory was proposed and continuously proved by scientists like Louis Pasteur (Britannica, 2024). This theory expressed that a tiny organism, too small to be seen with the naked eye, could cause a serious disease and disrupt the health of a whole organism. In 1928, Alexander Fleming adopted this theory, producing the antibiotic penicillin; these pills act as a dominant weapon against bacteria to this day. However, bacteria undergo asexual reproduction, which allows them to reproduce rapidly and form a large colony in a short time. During this process, bacteria cells may encounter mutations—changes in DNA organization—which provides them with resistance to the antibiotic. Therefore, doctors and scientists must continuously produce new antibiotics and vaccines to defeat different versions—the newly mutated forms of bacteria. For example, HIV—a sexually transmitted disease—has harmed humans for a prolonged duration due to its rapid evolution. As a result, HIV patients are usually prescribed “drug cocktails”—multiple HIV drugs taken together (UC Museum of Paleontology, n.d.). Nevertheless, these drugs only prolong the patient's life and fail to fully cure them. Consequently, the Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) was developed to restrain the virus from replicating itself (Eggleton, 2023). In addition, HAART controls viremia, a medical condition where viruses enter the bloodstream and have access to the body; it prevents viral transmission—the transmission of HIV to one's partner when sexual intercourse occurs (Zhang & Crumpacker, 2013). In addition to advanced technology that counters intruding pathogens and bacteria, mankind's self-preserving mindset has also brought technology that counters internal problems regarding the organization of nitrogen bases (DNA)—cancer. Mutations may bring resistance to a species, as it do with bacteria. Nonetheless, it may also bring biological disturbances to an organism. Nitrogen bases code amino acids, which accumulate to form a protein—a complex substance that directs cell function and structure. Cancer arises when nitrogen bases are mutated and the protein product ends up being altered, changing the activities of a cell. The normal cell produces tissues that maintain a size and structure appropriate to the body's needs. On the other hand, cancer cells violate this orderly structure, following their “own internal agenda for reproduction” and invading other healthy tissues (Weinburg, 1996). Back in 1940, conventional chemotherapy was introduced to defeat rapidly dividing cancer cells. With chemotherapy, a patient takes antitumor drugs, which are usually done intravenously—inserted through one's veins (National Cancer Institute, n.d.). Despite its high success rate, this therapy brings many side effects; it targets and works towards destroying or slowing down the growth of cancer cells, which destroys other healthy cells in the process, like the intestinal epithelium, a cell layer that forms the lining of the colon (Kong et al., 2018). Decades later, targeted cancer therapy was introduced, which decreased the side effects of cancer treatment. As its name suggests, targeted cancer therapy

interferes with “specific molecular changes” that are “unique to particular cancer”, decreasing the harm done to other healthy cells crucial to the body (Baudino, 2015).



Source: World Population Prospects (2017)

Figure 1: Life Expectancy Evolution

This graph proves that the efforts many countries made to advance technologically and medicinally have not been in vain. Life expectancy has gradually increased ever since the 20th century as a result of higher awareness of sanitary needs and medical necessities. Without the motivation to survive as an individual and a collective body, our society would not have developed such advanced drugs and medical technology that we standardize and consider ordinary today.

### Dynamic Mindsets of Society

As a result of one's self-preserving instinct, humans tend to feel sympathetic towards tragic, avoidable deaths, motivating them to debate or challenge social norms and legislation, contributing to the evolution of society's mindset. The self-preservation instinct is what Freud would name Eros: the life instinct. In Freudian theory, Eros represents the drive for life, which Thanatos, the death drive, opposes. These 2 forces are in a “constant and dynamic state of tension” (Cherry, 2024). Due to our life drive, we have intrinsic dissent towards death, which manifests in our emotions—like sympathy and grief. When our emotions are activated, they act as “constraints or organizers” that shape both short-term and long-term behaviors (Fisher et al., 1990). The “behaviors” focused on in this paper will be the fight for justice against discriminatory social norms and unjust legislation.

The globally famous movie *Titanic* introduced numerous themes that contradicted social norms, prompting scholarly debate and effectuating a comparatively flexible social hierarchy. This movie, starring the prominent actor Leonardo DiCaprio and actress Kate Winslet, has inspired much literature and the arts; it is still in high demand after almost a century, with millionaires risking their lives to see the leftover pieces of it deep underwater. But why was it so striking? Some may speculate that it was the number of deaths present. Nevertheless, other shipwrecks had even greater losses but were not equally influential. An example would be the French munitions ship *Mont-Blanc*, which exploded violently, killing not only the passengers but also about 2000 pedestrians on shore (Stone, 2023). *Titanic* struck its audience mostly as a



result of the controversial ideas it presented. Major themes included love between Rose and Jack of different social classes and the problems existing in class systems. At that time, Great Britain was a society with strict, rigid social classes “based on title and land holdings” (Rep, 2022). In short, wealthy businesspeople like J.P. Morgan were continuously gaining more wealth, while the poor continued to struggle. Similarly, in the luxurious and dignified Titanic ship, only the wealthy were given extravagancies and opulent accommodations. During the accident, the third-class passengers were not even notified early enough and were “deprioritized over the wealthier passengers when boarding the lifeboats,” which contributed to many of their deaths (Rep, 2022). Their accidental but *preventable* deaths raised awareness of the exploitation of the lower class, which motivated anti-segregation mindsets and hot debates during the 1990s. Consequently, the United States was influenced economically as the “lines between working and middle class were blurred,” providing additional opportunities for lower-class workers (Cathey, 2017).

From another perspective, a death that was *intentionally* spawned—in this case, legal assassination—can also activate these emotions; it has brought new legislation—furtherance in the legal system of China. In 1994, the Shijiazhuang Intermediate Court convicted 21-year-old Nie Shubin of intentional murder and rape and imposed the death sentence upon him. 10 years later, Wang Shujin, a perpetrator of several other rapes and murders, was detained and “voluntarily confessed” to raping & murdering a woman in Shijiazhuang City—the same woman Nie was accused of killing. This case was popular and published in many newspapers, with one titled “One Murder, Two Real Perpetrators.” After additional investigations, the police discovered that Nie was tortured by the police and forced to confess, which was common in the 1990s during the “strike hard campaign” (Yin, 2022). To alleviate the Chinese population’s loud criticisms, as well as global hostility from abolitionists, the Chinese government amended the Code of Criminal Procedure. This amendment gave the Supreme Court the right to review all death sentences; it also formed a death penalty review committee to guarantee the principle of “kill less and kill with caution” (Zaalouni, 2022). Without the instinct of self-preservation innately present in all human beings, there would be no voices of opposition and, thus, no action against injustice and unethical practices.

### Counterarguments

Firstly, regarding the Life Expectancy Evolution graph (Figure 1), some may argue that life expectancy increased based on several factors, which should not be summarized under “medicinal advancements”, as the author suggests. However, they may have misunderstood the term “medicinal advancements.” This term is broad and primarily refers to gaining more knowledge about medicinal plants’ antimicrobial activity and being informed of how chemical compounds within these plants react with other compounds (Vaou et al., 2021). Having information about these medicinal plants not only brings rise to new vaccines and advanced antibiotics; it can also be used as sanitary agents to sanitize environments and disinfect water systems—areas that have largely impacted life

expectancy. For example, rubbing alcohol (isopropyl alcohol) is made out of sugar cane and is an affordable and popular choice for sanitary agents, generating clean environments where germs will not accumulate. Therefore, “medical advancements” have indeed largely affected life expectancy. A second point would be that historically speaking, Nie Shubin’s investigations did not directly prompt the legislation amendments. This is true, as one death cannot realistically bring such drastic effects upon China’s legal system. It was the accumulated ‘avoidable’ deaths that brought those effects. Alongside Nie Shubin, the Huguile case also brought much attention due to the wrongful conviction with the sentence of the death penalty, as well as the case of Zhang Yuhuan, where an innocent man was held in custody for 27 years. The author’s point should be centralized on the accumulated impact of these pitiable, ‘avoidable deaths’ instead of the sole example. Moreover, the author asserts that this instinct of self-preservation has *directly* brought advancement and change. Yet, a direct relationship between the psychological instinct and the advancements has not been scientifically proven. Therefore, the author cannot simply speculate on this relationship without prior experimentation. Furthermore, in the ‘Interdependence’ section, the author argues that humans are interdependent because of the presence of instinct. Nevertheless, at present, countries cooperate and aid each other only when they have plentiful resources. In ancient times, when crucial resources were scarce, men fought against men, and there was merciless bloodshed. In this scenario, the author only considered the circumstances in modern-day society.

### Limitations and Further Direction

This study was limited in terms of defining the self-preservation instinct. This instinct was generalized as the motivation to protect and sustain oneself—the “life drive.” However, this instinct cannot be limited to this definition; it encompasses much more, like adaptive skills and the desire for adventure—to depart from stable conditions. Moreover, although this instinct is inherent, humans differ in how receptive they are to it. For example, many people commit suicide—selecting death over life. This proves that behavior is not *completely* driven by instinct. Consequently, this could hint that the instinct of self-preservation may be presided over. It could also demonstrate that external *circumstances* may be the dominant driving force of our actions. This study did not consider these alternatives and failed to investigate the instinct of self-preservation to a deeper, scholarly level. This research can be expanded by conducting further experiments to explore the instinct of self-preservation using advanced technology that monitors brain activity and the waves neurotransmitters send. This may provide valuable information regarding one’s biological makeup—their “innate” instincts—and its complex interaction with the environment—one’s family background, education, habitat, etc. The work of our subconscious mind, where our instincts reside, requires substantial research and additional tests. Is there a particular sector of our brain that ‘codes’ for this instinct? Does this ‘code’ enable us to accomplish great things and exceed the limitations of other organisms? All this requires extensive experimentation. Fortunately, in this society, such a goal is realistic and achievable due to the evolution of technology and

the expansion of knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The instinct of self-preservation has brought physical and intellectual alliances between nations, modern medical instruments, and the growth of a society's worldview. In this study, the author compiles numerous sources from scholars of various fields and delves into significant advancements of the past and present as a result of the "life drive." Notably, this self-preserving instinct continues to be the foundation of prosperity and evolution. For scientists, this paper can be considered a contribution to the discussion of how living organisms and ecosystems came to be. If humans are engineered so intricately— assembled with subconscious behaviors to bring prosperity— can it just be a predestined outcome of cosmic evolution? This paper highlights the substantial impact of one's desire for life. Additionally, it encourages further research regarding the inner mind and subconscious behavior in organisms.

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